
Iran Sells Nuclear Program, Buys Closure

Opinion | US-Iran Diplomacy & Nuclear Strategy

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ABSTRACT

This analysis proposes a reframing of the US–Iran nuclear negotiation as a strategic transaction rather than a matter of technical compliance verification. Rather than seeking incremental agreements around enrichment levels, inspection frequency, and snapshot snapshots of Iranian nuclear facilities, the author argues for a comprehensive settlement treating Iran’s nuclear program as a multi-decade national investment warranting economic compensation. The proposal values Iran’s accumulated nuclear assets and constraints at approximately \$200 billion—a figure anchored in Iran’s estimated direct investment in nuclear development (\$100–200 billion) and indirect losses through sanctions, asset freezing, and economic constraints over decades. In exchange for this settlement, Iran would agree to verifiable dismantlement of its 60%-enriched uranium stockpile, suspension of civilian nuclear energy development, commitment to Strait of Hormuz security, and gradual economic normalization including asset unfreezing and structured sanctions relief. The article argues that such an arrangement redefines closure not as Iranian surrender but as strategic repositioning, making the agreement defensible domestically within Iran while providing durable assurance to the international community. It concludes by contending that the true cost of realism lies not in the expense of such a settlement but in the far greater cumulative costs of indefinite confrontation.

KEYWORDS

Cost of Realism · Economic Logic · Economic Security · Energy Crisis · Iran Energy Policy · Iran’s Economic Reintegration · Iran’s Strategic Leverage · Iranian Nuclear Program · Maritime Chokepoint · Middle East Conflict · Middle East War · Nuclear Proliferation · Political Bargain · Sanctions on Iran · Strait of Hormuz · Strategic Ambiguity · Strategic Realism · US-Iran Breakthrough · US-Iran Ceasefire · US-Iran Comprehensive Settlement · US-Iran Compromise · US-Iran Definitive Settlement · US-Iran Diplomacy · US-Iran Negotiations · US-Iran Peace Talks · US-Iran Strategic Bargain · US-Iran War

JEL CODES

F51 – International Conflicts; Negotiations; Sanctions | **F52** – National Security; Economic Nationalism | **H56** – National Security and War | **D74** – Conflict; Conflict Resolution; Alliances | **Q41** – Energy: Demand and Supply; Prices

At moments of prolonged confrontation, [diplomacy tends to shrink](#). It becomes cautious, procedural, and trapped in familiar patterns—sanctions met with defiance, negotiations reduced to technicalities, and breakthroughs postponed in favor of temporary fixes. The long standoff between Iran and the United States is a case in point. What is missing is not

dialogue, but imagination anchored in strategic realism. If I were an Iranian negotiator, I would argue that the time has come for something altogether different: not another interim agreement, but a [comprehensive settlement](#) that resolves the nuclear issue by transforming it into a broader economic and political bargain.

“If I were an Iranian negotiator, I would argue that the time has come for something altogether different”

The central insight is simple but often avoided. Iran’s nuclear program is not only a proliferation concern; it is also a multi-decade national investment—financial, technological, and political. Any lasting resolution must therefore grapple not only with future restrictions, but also with past costs. Consider the most sensitive issue: [Iran’s stockpile](#) of highly enriched uranium. According to international estimates, Iran has accumulated hundreds of kilograms of uranium enriched to around 60%—material that significantly shortens the technical path to weapons-grade levels. Rather than treating this stockpile solely as a liability, it can be reframed as strategic leverage.

Under a serious agreement, Iran could accept the full neutralization or transfer of this material—roughly 450 kilograms enriched to 60%—under strict international verification. But such a step cannot be politically sustainable if presented domestically as a unilateral concession. It must be embedded in a broader settlement that recognizes what Iran is giving up, which is precisely why a more innovative approach becomes necessary. [Iran could, in effect](#), sell its nuclear program. For a price in the range of \$200 billion, Iran would agree not only to relinquish its existing stockpile—including its 60%-enriched uranium—but also to dismantle the strategic ambiguity and long-term potential embedded in its nuclear infrastructure. Viewed through this lens, the figure is not arbitrary; it is anchored in economic logic.

“For a price in the range of billions, Iran would agree not only to relinquish its existing stockpile, but also to dismantle the strategic ambiguity embedded in its nuclear infrastructure”

Over decades, Iran has likely invested between \$100 billion and \$200 billion in developing its nuclear capabilities—facilities, enrichment technology, scientific networks, and protective systems. Beyond these direct costs stand even greater indirect burdens: lost economic growth under sanctions, restricted oil revenues, and the prolonged freezing of national assets abroad. Seen in this light, a \$200 billion settlement is not excessive—it barely compensates for what has already been spent and lost. More importantly, such an arrangement would create a rare [alignment of interests](#). Iran would recover much of its historical investment, allowing its leadership to justify the agreement domestically as a strategic repositioning rather than a retreat. At the same time, the United States and the international community would obtain something that decades of pressure have failed to deliver: verifiable, durable assurance that Iran has exited the nuclear threshold. In other words, the world would not be paying for a promise—it would be paying for closure.

A second pillar of this grand bargain, meanwhile, would require a strategic shift in Iran's energy policy. Tehran could agree to suspend nuclear energy development for civilian electricity generation. In exchange, [international partners](#)—led by Washington—would invest in alternative energy infrastructure, including modernized [hydrocarbon](#)-based power generation and upgraded national grids. Such an arrangement would address proliferation risks while ensuring Iran's long-term energy security. Equally essential to any durable settlement would be economic normalization. The release of Iranian assets held abroad and a structured, credible lifting of sanctions would be indispensable components of any agreement. Without tangible economic reintegration, no deal—however well designed—can endure.

“A second pillar of this grand bargain, meanwhile, would require a strategic shift in Iran's energy policy”

A final component of such a settlement would allow Iran to formalize a commitment of global consequence: guaranteeing the security and openness of the [Strait of Hormuz](#). At a time when global energy markets remain fragile, such a guarantee would reposition Iran not as a source of disruption, but as a stakeholder in stability. Critics will argue that such a proposal is politically unrealistic. But realism, properly understood, is not about limiting ambition—it is about recognizing costs. The cost of this agreement, however substantial, would still be far lower than the cumulative price of [continued confrontation](#): recurring crises, regional instability, and the ever-present risk of military escalation.

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Diplomacy is often framed as a process of mutual concession. But at its most effective, it is an exercise in reframing—turning liabilities into assets, and conflicts into strategic bargains. If I were an Iranian negotiator, I would not seek a narrow compromise. Instead, I would seek a definitive settlement—one that allows Iran to close the chapter on its nuclear program with [dignity and compensation](#), while offering the United States and the world something they have long demanded but never fully secured: lasting assurance. Because, in the end, the question is not whether peace is expensive, but whether conflict is cheaper.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mongi Hamdi served as Tunisia's Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2014. He previously held the position of Assistant Secretary-General at the United Nations, and was also appointed as the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations mission in Mali. He is distinguished by a career that combines diplomacy, international work, and technology.

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